

BLACK AS ME: NARRATIVE IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

This commentary responds to genetic testing of African ancestry through a series of personal narratives that reveal a complex, intimate, and individualised process of identity formation. The author discusses both how her family and others outside her family have fostered and challenged her sense of black identity. She concludes by maintaining that racial identity is not in the genes but in the world in which we live and the stories we construct and are able to maintain.

For the first time that I can remember, I attend a conference and say nothing. For two days I sit in the audience and never go to the microphone to speak. Not because I do not have anything to say, but because I am convinced that what I have to say will not be heard, or worse, will be dismissed as irrelevant. At a personal level, I do not want to risk being told that I do not know what I am talking about. At a political level, I do not want to have someone say to me that I have no right to speak for ‘others.’

It is June 2002, and I am at a conference in the United States on the implications of using DNA testing to trace the genetic ancestry of African Americans.¹ A majority of the audience and the speakers are African American, but there are also Blacks from the Caribbean and from Africa, and there are a few white faces.

From what I can understand, there is disagreement among African Americans about the personal and political value of tracing one’s genetic heritage. Many speak poignantly about the need to ‘fill a void’ and they seem persuaded of the benefits of using genetic technology to reclaim a history and identity erased by the slave trade. Their hope is that with genetic testing they will

¹ *African Genealogy and Genetics: Looking Back to Move Forward*. University of Minnesota. June 21–22, 2002.

be able to re-story their lives in a way that ties them to a once proud people somewhere in Africa. Other African Americans insist that DNA testing for genealogical purposes cannot address the malaise or redress the injustices experienced by some among them.

People from the Caribbean, now living in the United States, are somewhat more guarded in their contributions to the debate. They do not have a similar experience of a void that needs to be filled, and yet it would appear that they do not want to contest what is clearly a significant issue for some of their brothers and sisters in the black community. Some hypothesise that their limited enthusiasm for genetic ancestry tracing may be because their history, with colonisation, slavery, and its eventual abolition, is very different. Moreover, they have a lived experience that moves beyond oppression and marginalisation, and includes responsible government where black men and women occupy a majority of the seats in their national legislatures.

People from Africa have yet another perspective. They worry about any initiative that risks re-igniting tribalism if African Americans were to discover their ancestral roots in particular African tribes and begin to embrace and affirm certain racial ethnic categories.

I am a Canadian of Caribbean descent; my mother is from Barbados (my father is from England). I have a white face; and truth be told, a white body too. The fact is, however, that I am Black. How do I know? My mother told me so.

MY MOTHER TOLD ME SO: EARLY IDENTITY-FORMING BELIEFS

What can it mean, in the face of pigmentation to the contrary, for me to assert with confidence that I am Black?

There are many ways of understanding racial identity. For some, racial identity is a fairly stable aspect of an individual's personality, for others it is a developmental process influenced by environmental and personal factors (including individual attributes and personal life experiences). My own view is that lived experience inexorably shapes racial identity. Who I am is both a function of how I live in the world and engage with others, and how I 'come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world in which [I] live.'² It is clear to me that my racial identity

² K.J. Gergen. *The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology*. *American Psychologist* 1985; 266.

as a black person was (and is) carefully constructed for and by me. Along with Habermas, I believe that the development of personal identity and the maintenance of personal integrity are dependent upon interpersonal relations with others. Social intersubjective relations and, in particular, networks of relations of mutual recognition allow the self to emerge and over time help to stabilise the self.³

My aunts and uncles on my mother's side (their children and their children's children) are every shade of black. The spectrum is so great that at times there have been questions about infidelity. As we all know, however, when the genes are reshuffled during fertilisation there is no colour control. From an early age my mother taught me: before you marry be sure to tell your future husband you are Black because you can never know what you will get. Significantly, this lesson was not so much necessary because I was Black, but because others could not easily guess this from my skin colour. The fact is, I was constantly reminded to tell everyone that I was Black, to avoid a situation where someone I thought was my friend might later discover this dark secret and decide that we could not possibly be friends. Better to lose potential friends than to have 'real' friends turn out to be 'false' friends. In self-defence I learned at a very early age to greet people with 'Hello my name is Françoise, I'm Black.' I only stopped doing this in my mid-teens when a close friend told me this was really very tiresome . . . For some this anecdote will seem quite entertaining. But for me it is not in the realm of the amusing. Building a black identity is hard work when you have white skin.

There are things, however, that I can laugh about. When I was in my mid-twenties, my parents moved to Montreal. They bought an older home that needed to be renovated. One day my younger brother and I went to the paint store for supplies. Unbeknownst to us, while we were there my mother called the store to add a few items to our shopping list. When we got home, my mother asked us where we had been. Innocently we replied that we had been to the paint store. My mother was confused, 'But I called the store and asked them if there were two black people there and they told me "no".' To this day I remember saying 'Mom, look at us!' My mother is Black, identifiably so; she never saw any of her children as other than Black. Some of us were more West Indian than others, but we were all Black. Or, as my mother used to say, we were Red. In her youth, my mother would have been called a red nigger by some.

³ J. Habermas. 2003. *The Future of Human Nature*. Cambridge. Polity Press: 34.

In polite company, however, my mother was a Negro woman; and at one time, in court, she was required to testify to this effect. In 1964, my mother initiated a court challenge of discrimination in hiring against Montreal's Queen Elizabeth Hotel (then operated by the Hilton chain).⁴ After submitting her application for one of the advertised nursing positions, she was told that the vacancies had been filled: this was not the case, as the position was subsequently offered to a white nurse. The case was tried in 1965, and the Queen Elizabeth Hotel and Hilton were found guilty of contravening the 1964 *Act Respecting Discrimination in Employment*. For the next 11 years the hotels appealed the decision, seeking to have the conviction overturned. In 1977, the original decision was upheld by the Quebec Superior Court. The Hilton had to pay the minimum fine of \$25 dollars (the maximum fine was \$100). I was three-and-a-half years old when this case started. I was a fifteen-year-old teenager when the reporters arrived at the house to take the final pictures for an article reporting that the case had finally been settled. I still remember the floral print on the shirt my mother wore that day, and how she posed for the camera in front of our fireplace.

In my view, there are multiple ways in which I 'own' my black identity. There is my genetic identity, as affirmed by my risk for sickle cell disease (for which I was tested as a young child); my ethnic and cultural identity which includes self-proclaimed membership in the black community, participation in certain cultural events (e.g., Caribana, Jump-up) and eating certain foods (e.g., flying fish, cou-cou with okra, breadfruit); and lastly, there is my stakeholder identity as the daughter of a Black woman who has considerable personal experience with racism and discrimination.⁵ All of this contributes to a rich and, for me, personally compelling narrative identity. My life is a collection of stories (mine and those of significant others) that tells me where I am from, where I have been and where I am going. My true self is the one who senses and understands the meaning and responsibility of these stories – stories that are 'acquired, refined, revised, displaced, and replaced'⁶ over time through introspection and continued lived experience.

⁴ Her Majesty, the Queen, Complainant *versus* Hilton of Canada Limited, Accused. Court of Session, October 4, 1965 (docket # 2716).

⁵ For a summary of the many ways in which individuals may claim group membership see: D. Davis. Groups, Communities, and Contested Identities in Genetic Research. *Hastings Center Report* 2000; 30: 38–45.

⁶ M. Walker. 1998. *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics*. New York. Routledge: 113.

OTHERS TOLD ME 'NO': LATER IDENTITY-FORMING EVENTS

My racial identity is something that I negotiate and re-story on a regular basis. This re-storying takes place in what is sometimes an intimate and sometimes a forlorn space between myself and others – or in more academic terms, 'between personal agency or self-construction and social discourse within a larger contextual setting.'⁷

In my early twenties I travelled through Europe. At some point I decided to take a trip to the (former) Soviet Union. I ended up sitting on the plane next to two white women from Zimbabwe (the former Rhodesia). They were speaking in derogatory terms of the black community in their country. After a few minutes I interrupted them to tell them that I was Black and that I found their conversation offensive. They did not respond to the rebuke, but rather sought to contest the claim that I was Black. The conversation went something like this. 'You're not Black.' 'Yes I am.' 'But you can't be.' 'Why not, what do think makes someone Black?' A long discussion ensued and ended with them making the statement, 'Well you're not like all the others Blacks.' Racism abounds.

More than ten years later, I held a faculty position at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Periodically I had to fill out University forms that asked me to identify my race. As the daughter of an interracial couple, I always checked the box labelled 'other.' I did not select the race box for African Americans because I do not self-identify as African American; I am Black. Also, I had made a political decision at the time not to identify myself to the administration as Black, because I did not want them to be able to count me as a minority hire. The University was under a 1984 court desegregation order that required the institution to reach specific targets in the hiring of minorities as well as in the number of minority students enrolled.⁸ Hiring me, a person who looked

⁷ M.R. Hill & T. Volker. Strategies for Racial Identity Development: Narratives of Black and White Women in Interracial Partner Relationships. *Family Relations* 2000; 49: 194.

⁸ In 1968, a class action lawsuit was filed by Ms. Geier et al. concerning the obligation of the state of Tennessee to render or re-mediate the vestiges of a *de facto* (formerly *de jure*) system of segregated public higher education. In 1984, a settlement was reached requiring all schools of higher learning in the state of Tennessee to meet set objectives in hiring and enrolling minorities in pursuit of the goal of eliminating the vestiges of segregation. A court order was issued to this effect. Finally, in 2001, there was a mediated settlement. See: Geier et al. *versus* Sundquist et al. (2001 Consent Decree. United States District Court, Middle District of Tennessee, Nashville Division. Civil Action 5077). United States Department of Justice: <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/edo/documents/geiersettle.htm> (accessed on 30 June, 2003).

white, as an African American was not going to further the goal of promoting colour-blindness through colour-consciousness. The forms that I dutifully completed every term always came back the following term pre-printed with me identified as Caucasian (perhaps someone thought they were doing me a favour). I contested this reclassification and, to say the least, this caused confusion on the part of some and anger on the part of others. Eventually there was a call from someone in upper administration to explain to me that 'other' was a temporary category and that I had to be moved into a 'legitimate' race box. I explained that I was confused and did not know which box I should pick. I told the person on the end of the phone line that I was half White and half Black. He confidently asserted that I was Black. To show him the error of his ways, I next told him that I had made a mistake and that I was half Black and half Chinese. I asked him if he was still sure that I was Black. He hung up the phone.

To these stories many more could be added to illustrate the point that a proud and robust racial identity is not to be found in our DNA, but in the world in which we live and in the stories we are able to construct and sustain (with or without genetic information). In 2002, the inaugural edition of *Who's Who in Black Canada*⁹ was published and I was included among the original 700 entrants. I remember receiving the email asking for permission to include my biography. My initial thought was 'Have they seen a picture of me?' I read the message again. It clearly explained that they had collected information about me from my university website,¹⁰ which includes a picture of me. Few will understand the feelings I experienced – I was being accepted (at least by some) as a member of the black community. In jest, a close friend asked, 'Who's White in Black Canada?'

SLAVERY AND ME: MY PEDIGREE

Barbados was colonised by the British in 1627. Though there is archaeological evidence that the island was previously populated by Arawak and later by Caribe Indians, at the time the British settled the island there were no inhabitants. The first white settlers arrived with a few black people they had captured from a Portuguese vessel, whom they immediately categorised as English slaves. In the following years, slaves were routinely brought to

⁹ D.P. Williams. 2002. *Who's Who in Black Canada: Black Success and Black Excellence in Canada: A Contemporary Directory*. Toronto. D.P. Williams and Associates.

¹⁰ <http://www.bioethics.dal.ca>

Barbados from Africa to work on the plantations and specifically to cut the sugar cane. This practice continued until the early 1800s, at which time interest in the purchase of African born slaves was considerably diminished – there being enough Barbadian born slaves who were considered much less rebellious than their captured brethren. Indeed, an African born enslaved man, Bussa, is credited with initiating the (failed) 1816 slave rebellion. Slavery was finally abolished in Barbados in 1834. My ancestors would have been among those freed at this time.

My mother, Gloria Leon Baylis (née Clarke) was born in Barbados in 1927. Her mother (my grandmother), Antoinette Margaret Clarke (née Miller) was born in 1906 in New York of Barbadian parents who returned to the island shortly after her birth. From the age of three my grandmother lived in Barbados. She married a Barbadian, Reynold Livingston Leon Clarke also born in 1906. My grandmother's mother was Antoinette Carolyn Miller (née Chase) born in 1883 of Barbadian parents. She was the daughter of Helen Chase (née Harding) (n.d.) who married Frederic Chase, son of John Augusta Chase and Joannah (original family name unknown), all of whom were Barbadian. Beyond this, there is no archival or anecdotal information for this branch of my family tree. I am confident, however, if the information were available, within a generation or two I would identify enslaved relatives.

Despite this fact, I have no need for, or interest in, genetic ancestry tracing. I know that, in terms of genetic diversity, all humans are Africans residing either in Africa or in relatively recent exile.¹¹ It just so happens that some of my ancestors are among the more recent, and most unwilling, exiled individuals.

DNA AND THE SELF

We all know that we are so much more than our DNA and yet at the same time we understand that genetic information has the power to stabilise or rupture personal (including racial) identities. This is because of the way in which genetic data about oneself, one's family and one's community influence both internal and external factors relevant to the construction of self. We are both who we say we are (based on our own interpretation and reconstruction of personal stories) and who others will let us be

¹¹ S. Paabo. The Human Genome and Our View of Ourselves. *Science* 2001; 291: 1219–1220.

(as mediated through historical, social, cultural, political, religious and other contexts). So it is that the introduction of new genetic information into the ongoing process of identity formation – which involves a complex interaction between ‘self’-perception, ‘self’-projection, ‘other’-perception and ‘other’-reaction – is bound to have an impact. The identity-impact of this information may be affirming (as when there is a way to establish some kind of continuity), or it may be exceedingly disruptive and seriously threatening to the self.

An individual who consents to genetic ancestry tracing may identify an African ancestry of which s/he can be proud. Alternatively, s/he may discover a European ancestry, which would not be surprising given the past sexual practices of some white slave owners. In either case, it is likely that the information provided will shape or re-shape a particular stakeholder identity. And, in any particular case, one can imagine that the information could prove to be empowering, or it could simply add to the legacy of hatred, alienation and distrust. In the end, each individual will find a way to story the information.

... the stories that people tell about themselves, reflect people’s experience, as they see it and as they wish to have others see it . . . [N]arratives are a way to articulate and resolve core, universal problems and a way to avoid or heal biographical discontinuities. Through stories people organize, display, and work through their experiences.¹²

For many of us, these experiences will include genetic testing whether for therapeutic, research, enhancement, genealogical, or other purposes. The disruptive power of such testing is already evident with the ‘diagnosis’ of a genetic predisposition to a particular disease; the *in utero* diagnosis of a foetal anomaly; the disclosure of results from paternity testing; and the personal and familial sequelae of quests for birth parents (especially where these parents have no desire to be found). I suspect that genetic ancestry tracing will have a similarly disruptive power.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

In closing, I want to reassert my view that our racial identity is not in our genes, but in the world in which we live and in the stories we choose to construct and are able to sustain. In fact, it is only

¹² G. Becker. 1997. *Disrupted Lives: How People Create meaning in a Chaotic World*. Berkeley. University of California Press: 25.

because identities are constructed that we can conceive of ways in which genetic information can affect an individual's personal sense of self and belonging, as when the information confirms or contests a key feature(s) of one's identity.

When I think back on the conference on African genealogy and genetics and wonder about my own silence (especially given my generally confident and forceful personality), I am reminded of what I already know – race just is particularly complicated in the US. In writing this paper, I have stopped to wonder if I would have been silent had the conference been held in Canada where the history of race relations is so different. This is not to deny Canada's shameful past as regards race relations; but Canada does not have a history of slavery and civil war. Upon reflection, I think geography mattered (and matters) and this again tells us how much our context, our lived experiences and our stories have to do with who we are and how we construct and maintain our identity.

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